

American Kestrel

Description:

The American kestrel is the smallest, most common and most colorful member of the falcon family. It was formerly known as the "Sparrow Hawk". Its scientific name, *sparverius*, is Latin for 'pertaining to sparrows' even though sparrows are only an occasional prey item.

Are They Crying?

This lovely robin-sized raptor is rust-colored with the typical falcon body shape: long, narrow, pointed wings, short neck and small head. The head feathers have a beautiful black and white pattern with a black "teardrop" on either side of the head, but they aren't really supposed to look like they are crying at all. These black falcon face marks, or mustache marks, act much like the black under a football player's cheek, cutting down glare from the sun. As one of the few birds of prey where males and females have different colorations, male kestrels sport blue-gray wings and a blue cap on the head along with an unbarred tail. The female is more demure in rusty brown and a barred tail. (pics of male and female here) In flight, rapid wing beats of their pointed wings help to identify the kestrel.

The average kestrel weighs less than one pound. Kestrels have a shrill rapid call which sounds like "killy, killy, killy." This call gives this species its nickname of "killy hawk."

What's that?

The kestrel could be confused with a few other birds that are close to its size. The adult sharp-shinned hawk is of similar size but has compact, rounded wings, a grey body and black cap. Both adult and juvenile hawks lack the black facial markings characteristic of a falcon. The merlin, another falcon, is slightly larger and appears uniformly dark without the bright rusty color of the kestrel. Both the sharp-shinned hawk and the merlin are less common than the kestrel.

No need to Build a Nest!

Kestrels are cavity nesters and will take advantage of abandoned woodpecker nests, tree cavities and artificial nest boxes. The female kestrel lays four to five eggs which are incubated mostly by her, but the male will occasionally take turns. Both parents care for their nestlings which leave the nest 30 days after hatching.

Small Bird, Big Appetite

Like kestrels themselves, the prey of kestrels tend to also be small. Large insects such as grasshoppers, beetles and crickets are readily taken. So are mice, voles, shrews, and small birds such as house sparrows. Kestrels commonly spot their prey from a perch from where they swoop down for a capture. Long, slender, falcon wings allow for the fast flight needed to catch speedy prey. Kestrels may also be seen hovering over an open meadow searching for prey lurking in the grass. These hunting skills are passed to their young at an early age. Kestrels hunt in groups until their offspring can hunt completely on their own.

Predators

Because of their small size, kestrels frequently become meals for larger hawks, especially the accipiters which specialize in hunting birds. Vehicle collisions are also common when the kestrel swoops down to capture prey on a road.

Where do They Live?

Although kestrels are found from alpine zones down into desert habitats, they generally prefer open country with woodlots and scattered trees. They are also frequently seen along roads perched on fences or power lines as they scan the ground for food. The American kestrel's ability to adapt to such varying conditions has enabled it to remain one of North America's most abundant raptors. It's distributed very widely throughout North and South America. It is a year-round resident in most of the United States and a summer resident in Canada.



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No Footprint

Footprint

No Map

Distribution Map

1. **Species:** American Kestrel
2. **Scientific Name:** *Falco sparverius*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: less than 1 lbs.
Length: 9-11 inches.
Wingspan: 22 inches.
5. **Diet:** Insects, small birds, and small mammals.
6. **Young:** 4-5 per year; called chicks.
7. **Lifespan:** 11 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Ciconiiformes
Family: Falconidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**